

Exploring the Relationship among Social Media Use, Body Image, and Gender

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Abstract

Men and women's body image has been thoroughly studied, providing evidence that men and women experience negative body image in different ways. This includes their behaviors to cope with negative body image and the impacts that negative body image may have on them. The purpose of the current research is to examine the relationship between viewing different body types on social media and how this may impact an individual's body image differently for men and women. It was hypothesized that those who view different desired body types online would be more

likely to report negative body image. It was also hypothesized that women would be more likely than men to report negative body image when viewing different body types. Men were expected to fixate more on fit ideals and behaviors. Results showed that there was no significant difference between men and women's body image. Results suggested that viewing different desired body types online is correlated with more negative body image. Results also showed that men were more likely than women to fixate on muscle toning behaviors and ideals.

People may have varying views of their body: positive, negative, or neutral. Body image can be defined as "a person's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about one's own body" (Yu, Damhorst, & Russell, 2011). The knowledge on body image is expanding every day, and new factors that impact body image are being further researched. The beliefs and feelings that people have for their bodies can be influenced by many outside sources, whether that be media, such as TV shows and movies (Hobza et al., 2007), social media (Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2020), or peers (Lin et al., 2015). The goal of the current research is to examine how social media, along with gender, play a part in impacting body image. Developing a greater understanding of the potential impacts that social media can have on individuals can help to deter such negative effects in the future.

Social Media and Body Image

Social media have become a normal part of human life. This integration of social media into everyday life is new, so there is not an extensive amount of research on how it may impact people in the long term. One impact that has already been witnessed is engaging in social comparison to idealized body types. For many cultures, there are ideals such as thinness or muscular tone that are internalized by members of that culture (Magallares, 2016). When people

are repeatedly exposed to body types that their culture has deemed "ideal," there is often comparison, and with comparison there may be negative consequences (Hobza et al., 2007; Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016). Kohler and colleagues (2020) suggest that those who engage in comparison with online idealized body types are more likely to have higher anxiety and decreased mood. There are sometimes even more dire consequences for partaking in comparison with dissimilar body types; behaviors such as disordered eating, unhealthy amounts of exercise, and steroid use are associated more with those who engage in social comparison (Hobza et al., 2007). For example, a study conducted by Lewallen and Behm-Morawitz (2016) found that participants who engaged in social comparison by following fitness boards on Pinterest were more likely to engage in extreme weight loss behaviors in order to attain the body types they were viewing.

Those using social media may be posting content for others to see, but something else to consider is how the users view their online persona. Generally, research has shown that higher social media use (both posting and viewing) is associated with lower body-esteem and low appearance satisfaction (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2019; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2020). This dissatisfaction comes from the constant posting of the self and viewing the posts as separate from what individuals view as themselves in real life. Particularly,

Choukas-Bradley and colleagues (2019) study measured women's appearance-related social media consciousness (ASMC). Having a high ASMC meant that participants were very aware of their image to their online audience. Those in the study who had a prominent ASMC were more likely to have negative emotional effects, such as high body comparison and depression symptoms (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2019).

As people are aware of their own body, they may also be aware of certain body types that are stigmatized in their culture. Specifically, weight bias plays a role in our reactions to the different body types we see. Grogan's (2010) research mentions that in many cultures, being "too" thin or "too" fat is seen as negative and unwanted. This bias can lead to both personal bodily dissatisfaction as well as the stigmatization of smaller or larger bodies (Darlow & Lobel, 2010). If certain bodies are being presented in media with a stigma attached, the viewer could further perpetuate that stigma through internalizing those ideals (Savoy & Boxer, 2020). This means that people could see a body type that is either very different from theirs (an example being a heavier woman viewing an idealized thin woman in media) or very similar (a muscular man viewing a muscular man) and then internally confirm that their body must be a certain way in order to fit into that culture.

Gender and Body Image

Women are stereotypically portrayed as caring more about their appearance as compared to men. While this is true for some, the reason behind this may be due to societal pressures. Pretty consistently in cultures around the world, women are expected to be thin; particularly in Western cultures, women are expected to be thin with larger breasts (Darlow & Lobel, 2010; Lin et al., 2015). These expectations of a woman's body type can lead to some women partaking in behaviors such as exercise avoidance or excessive exercise and disordered eating (Grogan, 2010), and research has shown that these behaviors occur more often with women than with men (Hobza et al., 2007; Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016).

Compared to women, men have a slightly different set of issues regarding body image ideals. One problem is that men's negative body image issues are less frequently noticed by others; this is widely due to the prominent fear in many cultures that tells men not to voice their emotions, casting a shadow on these issues. This can make men's negative body image issues difficult to recognize and assess (Burlew & Shurts, 2013). However, one trend has been assessed when it comes to male body ideals in the media. In many media depictions, the male figures are muscular, and this trend has become more common over time (Burlew & Shurts, 2013; Hobza et al., 2007). Furthermore, these depictions have been shown to impact males' self-esteem, with those who are impacted being more likely to engage in activities such as

unhealthy amounts of exercise, dieting, and steroid use (Hobza et al., 2007).

There is some overlap in the behaviors men and women use to cope with negative body image. For example, both men and women are likely to engage in extreme dieting and strenuous exercise when viewing idealized body types that are different from their own (Grogan, 2010; Hobza et al., 2007). Research has exemplified that both men and women partake in these behaviors, but more information is needed to understand why some of those behaviors are more or less likely to occur.

Viewing Similar Bodies

Summarizing the research above, it is apparent that viewing dissimilar body types online can influence viewers (men and women) to change their own bodies. However, there is research that suggests that no matter what the body type, those who view similar bodies are likely to react more positively than if they were to view a different body type. For example, research has shown that women participants have a more positive perception of brands that advertised models with similar body types to the viewer (Yu et al., 2011). The most research has been done on plus-size women when it comes to representing more diverse body types. This can be exemplified by Pounders and Mabry's (2019) study that inspected the reactions that consumers had to viewing plus-size bodies being represented in magazines. Many participants who were plus-size themselves were satisfied that people who looked similar were being represented. Most participants who responded with some level of disgust or disappointment were not plus-size. This research suggests that viewing someone who looks similar in media will evoke a more positive response (Pounders & Mabry, 2019).

In addition, a study conducted by Marcus (2016) included two groups of body types/communities online: pro-anorexia and fat-positive communities. Because each of these groups had similar body types to each other, their reactions while viewing each other were assessed. The first exposure to each other generally gave participants a sense of belonging, implying that exposure to those similar body types was not a negative reaction. This reaction then led to the group supporting each other through comments. This is important because those who were in a support network were less likely to have depressive symptoms (Marcus, 2016).

The Current Research

Given the current available literature, there seems to be a need to investigate how exposure to different body types online may affect body image, as well as how this may be different between men and women. There is a gap in the research specifically on how body image is impacted through social media. There is little to no research on viewing different body types online and the related effects it can have on individuals. It could be that similar body types make an individual feel better and included, or that different bodies

make them feel worse because they do not have that body type. It could also very well be a combination of both. In the current research, I will explore individuals' reactions to different body types and measure body image and satisfaction after viewing fabricated social media posts. I will also inspect the behaviors that individuals are likely to partake in, such as exercise and dieting. The importance of including gender in this research regards the differing (and similar) ways in which men and women react to certain body standards. More information is needed on how men and women react when exposed to differing body types while using social media. The hypothesized outcome is that women and men will be affected differently, with women having a more negative body image. Those who are impacted by viewing different body types online are predicted to be more likely to report a negative body image. It is also expected that men will be more likely to fixate on strength and muscle toning behaviors.

Method

Participants

A total of 57 undergraduate students participated in this study. In this group, 58% were female and 42% were male. Ages ranged from 18 to 33 ($M=19$). Class ranks were represented by 25 first-year students, 16 second-year students, 8 third-year students, 7 fourth-year students, and 1 fifth-year student. Regarding race, there were 12 African American or Black students, 2 Asian students, 40 European American or White students, 1 Latino student, and 2 students identified as "other."

Materials

Social media usage (including posting and viewing content online) was assessed using eight forced-choice questions (Appendix A). The first part asked things such as, "How much time do you spend actively scrolling on social media per day?", "How often do you post images of yourself on social media?", and "Do you currently follow any fit inspiration or 'fitspo' pages?". The second part utilized a Likert scale with statements such as, "When browsing social media, I find myself comparing my body to others that I see online," "I prefer to view body types on social media that are similar to my own," and "I follow a diverse array of people on social media that have both similar and dissimilar body types to my own." Participants indicated their agreement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

The Fit Ideal Internalization Test (FIIT) (Uhlmann, Donovan, & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2020) was used to measure both body dissatisfaction and thin and muscular ideal internalization. There are 20 items which participants answered on a 5-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Some statements were "I often feel concerned about the progress I am making towards achieving a perfectly lean and toned body" and "I spend time fixating on parts of my body that are not very lean and toned."

The Body-Image Ideals Questionnaire (BIQ) (Cash & Szymanski, 1995) was used to measure self-discrepancies in appearance and internalized ideals for some physical characteristics. Participants rated ten bodily attributes. First, they rated how similar each attribute was to their current attributes on a scale from -1 (exactly as I am) to +3 (very unlike me). Then they rated how important having each of those ideal attributes was to them on a scale from 0 (not important) to 3 (very important).

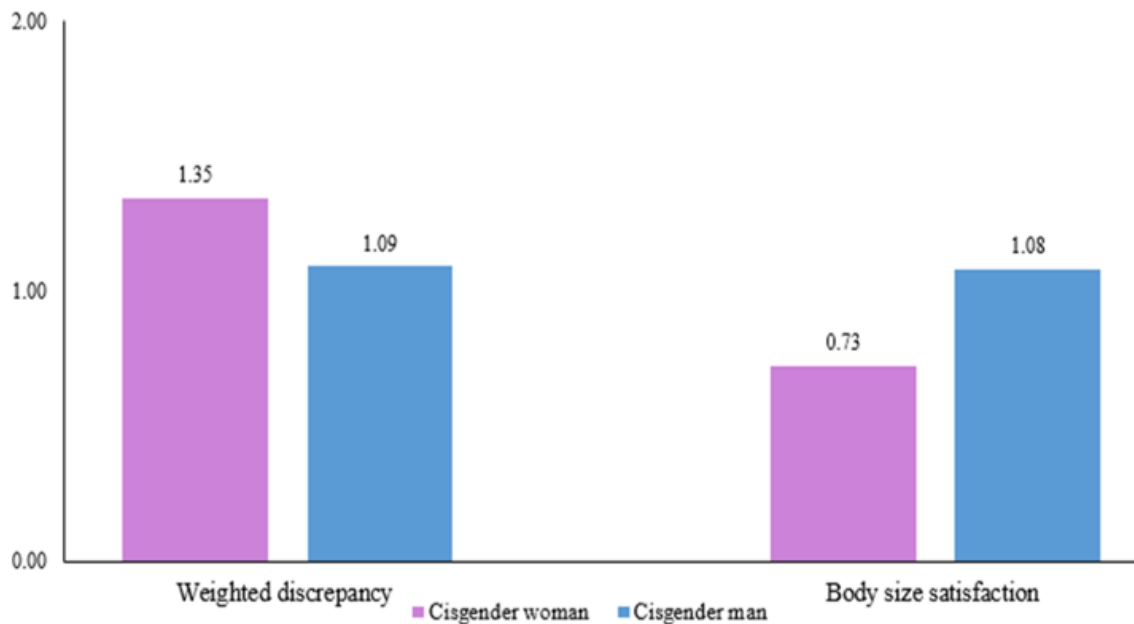
The Stunkard scale (Stunkard, Sorensen, & Schulzinger, 1983) was used to measure body dissatisfaction. Participants were presented with images of nine different body shapes and were asked to first select the image that reflects how they think they look and second, select the way that they would ideally want to look.

Fabricated Instagram images (Appendix B) were used to measure how participants responded to viewing different and similar body types. Five fabricated Instagram post images were made using zeob.com. Each fabricated post depicted a person with a different body type. Two images were stereotypically fit body types, and three were stereotypically average body types. After each of the images, participants rated their agreement with three statements meant to determine their reactions to varying body types utilizing a Likert scale from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 6 ("Strongly Agree"). The statements included, "This image makes me feel negative about my own body," "This image is ideally how I would like my own body to look," and "This image is similar to the types of images I like to view on social media."

Procedure

Participants were recruited from the Research and Experiment Participation System (REPS) and came from a variety of undergraduate courses. Participants first read through the informed consent, and either consented to participate or not. If they chose not to consent, then the study terminated, and they were redirected to the debrief form. If participants chose to go forward, then they were directed to the first set of questions. Participants first answered eight questions regarding their social media usage. Participants then completed the FIIT (Uhlmann, Donovan, & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2020), the BIQ (Cash & Szymanski, 1995), and the Stunkard scale (Stunkard, Sorensen, & Schulzinger, 1983). The last section had participants view (fabricated) Instagram images of different body types in a randomized order. Males viewed five images of males, and females viewed five images of females. This was the only difference in what male and female participants viewed. After each of the five images, participants answered questions to assess their reactions to these posts. Participants then answered demographic questions about gender, age, class rank, and race. The participants then read the debrief form and were thanked for participating.

Figure 1
Differences in Weighted Discrepancy and Body Size Satisfaction Between Men and Women



Note. There were no significant differences in men and women's weighted discrepancies or body size satisfaction.

Results

Hypothesis 1

Women were hypothesized to experience a bigger impact on their body image from viewing different body types online. An independent samples t-test was used to assess these differences. There were no significant differences in men and women's body image. Specifically, there was no significant difference in weighted discrepancies between men and women, $t(55) = 0.79, p = 0.428$, and there was no significant difference in body size satisfaction between men and women, $t(55) = 0.86, p = 0.392$ (see Figure 1).

Hypothesis 2

It was also hypothesized that those who reported viewing different body types online impacted them in some way would have a more negative body image. A correlational analysis was used to assess the relationship. Responding negatively to the fit body type images was significantly positively correlated with body size satisfaction (specifically wanting to be smaller), $r(55) = .506, p < .001$. In addition, comparing one's own body to others online was significantly positively correlated with responding negatively to the fit body images, $r(55) = .660, p < .001$.

Hypothesis 3

Finally, men were hypothesized to be more likely than women to fixate on muscle toning behaviors and ideals. An independent samples t-test was used to assess the differences. There was a significant difference in FIIT scores, such that men scored higher than women. Specifically, men

scored higher in both fit overvaluation, $t(54) = -2.51, p = .015$, and fit drive, $t(54) = -1.97, p = .035$ (see Figure 2).

Discussion

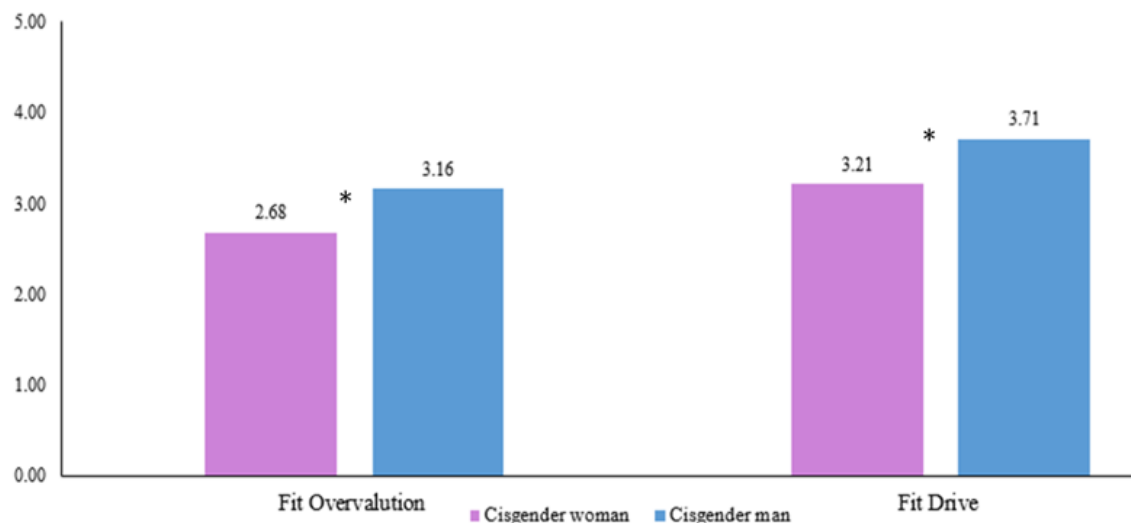
Overall, two of the hypotheses were supported and one was not. Men and women were hypothesized to have a difference in body image. Results showed that there was no significant difference between men and women's body image. Specifically, there were no significant differences in weighted discrepancies or body size satisfaction. This means that men and women did not differ in how they viewed certain bodily attributes about themselves, nor in their satisfaction with their current body type.

The second hypothesis was that those who were impacted by viewing different body types online would also report more negative body image. Results supported this hypothesis, as responding negatively to the fit body type images was significantly correlated with wanting to have a smaller body size. Participants who compared their body to others online were also more likely to respond negatively to the fit body type images.

For the last hypothesis, men were expected to be more likely than women to fixate on fit ideals and behaviors. As expected, results showed that men were more likely than women to overvalue fitness as well as have a higher drive to be fit.

Regarding previous research, some of the results from this study did line up with previous findings, whereas some results did not. In line with previous research (Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2020), social

Figure 2
Differences in Fit Overvaluation and Fit Drive Between Men and Women



Note. There was a significant difference in fit overvaluation and fit drive scores, with men scoring significantly higher than women in both instances.

media had significant impacts on body image. Another similarity is the impacts of social comparison. Kohler and colleagues' (2020) research suggested that those who engage in social comparison also have higher anxiety and decreased mood. This is in line with the current research, which suggests that these individuals also have a more negative body image. Current research also replicates the findings from previous research when it comes to men and muscular ideals (Burlaw & Shurts, 2013; Hobza et al., 2007), as men were more likely to fixate on these ideals. Contrary to previous research (Hobza et al., 2007; Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016), men and women did not have significant differences in their overall body image.

Limitations

There were a few limitations to this study. First, there was a small sample size ($N = 57$). A larger sample size may have provided a wider array of responses. Another limitation was that the study was available only for those who identify as a man or a woman. There was no representation for those who identify as non-binary or non-conforming. The study could have also included more diverse body types in the fabricated Instagram images. Having more options could have provided participants the chance to relate more to the body types presented if they saw their own body type.

Future Research

Looking forward, there are several directions that this research could take. Relationships with fitness were examined, but it would be interesting to examine relationships with diet behaviors as well. I would hypothesize that those who engage in social comparison online would be more likely

to partake in extreme dieting behaviors or fad diets. Another interesting direction this research could take is expanding to other identifiers, such as race, age, or sexuality. To examine the impacts that social media may have on the body image of identifiers beyond gender could provide valuable information. Depending on the identifier used, I would assume that whichever groups in a particular culture are less represented would likely have more negative body image. Taking this research even further, it could also be interesting to examine intersections of identity to better understand how overlap may impact body image differently. This could include identity intersections such as young Black women, elderly homosexual men, or middle-aged White women. Again, I would assume that those groups who may be more oppressed in a certain culture would be more likely to have negative body image.

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